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McNamara View Dooms Bomber

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The Air Force will never get a new long-range bomber if the McNamara view of nuclear war endures—and it probably will.

There simply is no rational reason, by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara's measurement of rationality, for a new bomber. His policy on nuclear war is to deter it, not try to fight it against a large enemy with any hope of surviving. He probably can carry out the policy without any big bomber, certainly without an expensive new one.

McNamara's nuclear war policy is a controversial one. The Joint Chiefs of Staff and many congressmen dispute it, but technology—advancing both in performance and cost—is on McNamara's side.

The Pentagon is designing weapons today for use during the rest of this century. It is looking at the possibilities of offense and defense for this and other countries, and what it is concluding is grim:

The cheapest kind of nuclear offense—the long-range ballistic missile—can be made to overcome the most expensive kind of defense.

Any country that wants to try, therefore, will be able to slaughter its enemies. But it will not be able to protect its own people.

Maximum national security will lie in a deterrent threat to any attacker, and a large missile force looks like a convincing deterrent.

There are a number of proposed defenses against long-range missiles. The Soviet Union has started to build one, and the Johnson administration is testing one. But both the American and Russian defensive systems

can be overwhelmed by great numbers of missiles, and it is not expensive to acquire great numbers.

But suppose the Russians discover a defense that really does stop all of the missiles—some device now unknown to science? This is possible, but it is almost inconceivable that any defense that could catch thousands of dodging, hiding, spoofing warheads or rockets couldn't also knock off a bomber.

Moreover, the McNamara logic continues, if such a defense is invented, it certainly would be able to catch the missiles launched by the bomber. For the fact is, modern nuclear-war bombers launch small missiles; they don't drop bombs.

But to carry the argument even farther, if the Air Force postulates a war in which missiles don't work but bombers carrying some sort of "X" weapon do, McNamara still has an answer: The Air Force can use its old bombers.

His technical advisers tell him that the existing B-52 heavy bombers can be renovated and repaired for another decade for less than the cost of new planes. And the bomber version of the TFX, the FB-111, will be good for another 20 or 30 years.

The Air Force reply to this argument is that a new bomber, specifically the "advanced, manned strategic aircraft" (AMSA) being designed today, will be a better aircraft than the B-52 and bigger and better than the FB-111.

Since one does not know what will be militarily useful in the future, the United States should improve its planes all

the time, the Air Force argues.

McNamara and his technical advisers concede half of the argument. They say that improvements are needed to insure that a bomber will penetrate enemy defenses, but they say that no one knows today what those improvements will be and that whatever they are, they can be put on an old bomber.

An airplane penetrates not with great speed or altitude but with electronic devices that detect and fend off enemy defensive weapons. A new bomber would be crammed with these devices—new and improved ones every year.

But whatever devices are used can be put in a B-52 or miniaturized, like space gadgetry, and put into the small FB-111.

The logic of the McNamara position is difficult for the Air Force to overcome—particularly with a dubious hedge that would cost \$10 billion.

During the last year the Air Force actually lost ground in the Pentagon. A year ago Air Force Secretary Harold Brown accepted the arguments of his generals to the extent of asking for permission to do advanced design work on the plane. McNamara said no.

But this year Brown is asking only for a continuation of preliminary paper work.

Unless the technicians and scientists are wrong, missiles will grow increasingly effective as the century wears on while defense becomes increasingly difficult and bombers more expensive. So even McNamara's successors may take the same dim view of the Air Force's favorite weapon.